



March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month - Early Detection Can Save Your Life!

Even though colorectal cancer can be detected and treated in its early stages, colorectal cancer is still the third leading cause of cancer death for women.

For most cases, colorectal cancer develops over the course of several years by starting as a simple growth of tissue (polyp) or as a flat lesion in the lining of the colon or rectum. With colorectal cancer screening, these growths can be detected early and removed before they progress to cancer. If colon cancer is found early, the 5 year survival rate is 90 percent. (1)

Disparities

Racial, ethnic, and economic disparities have consistently been documented. Among Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic women in Los Angeles County, who have lower screening rates for colorectal cancer than white or black women, colorectal cancer is the second most common cancer. However, black women, who have the highest screening rate, have the highest mortality rate. Screening rates increase with increasing household income levels. (2)

Risk Factors

The risk of colorectal cancer begins to increase after age 40 and continues to increase as you get older. The most common risk factors associated with colorectal cancer are obesity, physical inactivity, cigarette smoking, a diet high in red or processed meats, and heavy alcohol consumption. Risk is also increased by certain inherited genetic mutations.

Screenings

Early colorectal cancer often has no symptoms which is why screening is so important. In spite of this, screening rates are low for women in Los Angeles County (60%), especially compared with rates of other preventive screening tests such as mammography (84%) and Pap tests (74%). (2) Reasons for low screening rates include lack of knowledge about the importance of screening, testing options, and the treatability of colorectal cancer; embarrassment; fear of being diagnosed with cancer; and the cost, especially for low-income, uninsured women.

Everyone 50-75 years old should be screened for colorectal cancer. There are several different screening tests that can be used to find colorectal cancer early. Talk to your doctor about which test is right for you. Anyone who is at increased risk for colon cancer should talk with a doctor about more frequent testing or beginning earlier.

Prevention Matters!

There are many prevention strategies including a good diet with plenty of grains, regular physical activity, limiting alcohol, not smoking, and, of course, getting recommended screenings.

Be Active, Eat Smart, Don't Smoke, Get Checked!

References

1. American Cancer Society Website; Accessed at:
<http://www.cancer.org/cancer/ColonandRectumCancer/index>
2. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Women's Health. Health Indicators for Women in Los Angeles County: Highlighting Disparities by Ethnicity and Poverty Level, February 2010.
<http://lapublichealth.org/phcommon/public/reports/rptspubdisplay.cfm?unit=owh&ou=ph&prog=programs>